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Culture, race, and the welfare state: the British contribution to the 1966 First World Festival of Black and African Culture

Pan-African festivals on the African continent have become a critical focal point for Africanist scholars from a range of disciplines in recent years, offering a range of fresh archival sources and revealing the plurality of pan-African discourse and forms of solidarity from the 1960s to the present day.¹ This article analyses the British contribution to the First World Festival of Negro Arts, which took place in Dakar in April 1966 under the leadership of Senegalese President and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Senegalese intellectual and founder of the influential journal, *Présence Africaine*, Alioune Diop. This North-South encounter is less-documented than the trans-Atlantic and inter-African cultural exchanges in this period which dominate existing scholarship on pan-African festivals and Black internationalism. As such, this paper contributes a fresh transnational dimension to current understanding of early Black British cultural production, its pan-African dimensions, and its institutional contexts in the mid-twentieth century. Involving cultural institutions such as the British Museum, the BBC and the nascent Arts Council, Britain's contribution to Dakar '66, was symptomatic of a post-war cultural zeitgeist faced with the context of decolonization and the aftermath of empire. The organising committee depended on these pillars of the post-war liberal establishment, while providing an unprecedented opportunity for black artists and performers (many of whom were first-generation migrants from the Caribbean) based in the UK to gain

¹ Andrew Apter. *The Pan-African Nation. Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005; David Murphy (ed). *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*. Liverpool: LUP, 2016.

professional recognition, visibility, and connections on the African continent forged through first-hand experience.

The Dakar festival brought together more than 2500 participants from across Africa and the African Diasporic world, organized by thirty-six national committees (thirty independent African nations and six countries with significant African diasporic populations). Its organisers' aim was to showcase African cultural unity in spectacular form, as the basis for post-independence development and create a forum for discussions of African cultural production. Following at least five years of planning, the programme included an international art exhibition, a conference, a series of prizes, and music, dance, and theatre performances ranging from Duke Ellington and Wole Soyinka to "dances ethnographiques" from Cameroon and Haute-Volta and a daily large-scale multimedia performance on Gorée Island.

As part of the British contribution to the festival, a ground-breaking theatre troupe, the Negro Theatre Workshop (NTW) performed a jazz adaptation of the Passion play, "The Dark Disciples" in Dakar's Catholic Cathedral on Easter Saturday. In what follows, the ideological and material contexts of that production will be analysed via archival traces of its creation and reception. The archives of the Negro Theatre Workshop are held at the George Padmore Institute in North London (where they have been catalogued, but are not yet open to the public), and complement the papers of its founder, Pearl Connor-Mogotsi, held at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, New York. Particular attention will be paid to the archive's articulation of welfare and race within the polarized

context of post-war British race relations, and as incipient elements of a shifting relationship between the state and cultural production in this period. Archival analysis combined with discussion of the production's aesthetic, enables us to use this case study to historicise the early construction and expression of Black British identity, acknowledging the role of both grassroots and macro-institutional agents. Indeed, the 1966 Festival – which remains little-known in the intellectual tradition of Black British cultural studies – signals the political, aesthetic, and linguistic porosity of “Britishness” in the second half of the twentieth century. Faced with the decline of Empire and new cultural and political dynamics from the global South, this event highlights “the slow emergence of a metropolitan politics generated by decolonisation” (Schwartz 9), destabilising the kind of insularity that had hitherto underpinned dominant notions of British identity, an insularity that is resurgent in the current critical moment.

The Dakar festival has been largely absent from British cultural memory, while Black British theatre remains an under-historicized and under-researched field of enquiry (Procter 2, McMillan 130). Black British cultural history has been dominated temporally by reference to the Windrush generation of the 1940s and 1950s, while research on Black British experience in transnational and translingual contexts has been lacking.² By moving beyond the residual spatial and linguistic imperial legacies of British and French West Africa, the NTW production signals little-discussed links between pan-African performance in

² It should go without saying that the presence of black people in Britain was not a post-WW2 phenomenon, as Peter Fryer's groundbreaking study, *Staying Power*, established over three decades ago.

francophone regions of the African continent and the kinds of diasporic cultural initiatives – both state-sponsored and independent – developing in Britain in the 1960s. In this sense, Africa can begin to be considered as a “constitutive locus” (Jaji 6) for thinking about Black experience in Britain, rather than an abstract idea or “mystical and ruthlessly positive” (Gilroy 189) reference point which has tended to dominate the complex cultural imaginary of the Black Atlantic.

Race relations and the liberal establishment

The post-war period saw some of the earliest political wrangling over the question of how to integrate, and make visible, Britain’s multiracial and multicultural population in the national cultural landscape. For the British committee, the Dakar festival provided a test case for the representation of this changing demographic on an international stage. On a larger scale, it formed part of a very gradual and uneven shift in British cultural policy in the twentieth century, from a liberal *laissez-faire* approach to a more concerted state-funded attempt to represent and integrate different elements of the population (Rogers).

In the forties and fifties, recently-arrived migrants in Britain (principally from the West Indies, and Jamaica in particular) faced widespread racial discrimination in access to housing and the labour market. This led to increased social unrest in urban areas, from the Notting Hill Riots in 1958 and Bristol Bus Boycott in 1963, and the introduction of new legislation aiming to control immigration from the Commonwealth. In 1965, the government introduced the first Race Relations Act, which, in theory, if not in practice, outlawed discrimination on the basis of colour, race, ethnic or national origins. The British

state sought to balance legislation limiting immigration (especially, it should be added, of non-white populations) with measures aimed at integrating immigrant populations already in the UK (Solomos 80). In this context, black writers and intellectuals were concerned with basic welfare rights, including access to housing, education and employment, as well as underlying concerns regarding artistic independence and their responsibility as exiles. In 1965, Malcolm X visited Britain, stimulating interest in Black Power in the UK, leading to a number of related groups, and debates which would be given visibility by the BBC and ITV by the late 1960s (Schaffer 125). Spurred by extremist rhetoric such as Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968, and the work of community organisers across the UK, questions of national identity, black British identity and multiculturalism would increasingly dominate debate and state cultural policy in the 1970s and 1980s.

Against this backdrop, the British committee for the Dakar Festival drew initially from members of two bodies, both concerned with brokering Britain's relationship to the rest of the world. The British Association for International Understanding (BAIU) was a non-governmental organisation founded in 1939. It published a fortnightly "British Survey" designed to provide information on foreign countries and international affairs for a general readership during the war and its patron was the Duke of Edinburgh. The Council for African-British relations was an organisation closely linked to the Foreign Office which published pamphlets similar to those of the BAIU, including *The Young Person's Guide to Independent Africa* in 1962. The British Festival committee was carefully composed as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, on the basis of foregrounding

“expert” scholarly knowledge about the continent. Its chairman was William Fagg, an ethnologist and art historian who worked at the British Museum throughout his career and provided the first systematic, chronological study of the Benin bronzes. His main involvement in the festival was the British Museum’s contribution to the central art exhibition. Alongside the art contribution and ethnographic “expertise”, the committee also sent two theatre groups to Dakar: the Pan-African Players – a group led by London-based Sierra Leonean playwright Yulisa Amadu Pat Maddy, but which has left little trace – and the Negro Theatre Workshop – a company formed by Trinidadian actors and cultural activists in the early 1960s.

The founders of the Negro Theatre Workshop, Pearl and Edric Connor, were acquainted with the representation of racial minorities in the British cultural landscape long before 1966. Edric Connor arrived in Britain in 1944 from Trinidad as an engineering student with a longstanding interest in Caribbean folk music. He brought letters of introduction to the BBC with him, which led to a series of successful radio, television and film appearances as an actor and singer in the 1940s and 50s. He actively promoted Caribbean music in the mainstream, organising, for example, the participation of the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra in the Festival of Britain in 1951, and singing at Westminster Abbey to mark the independence of Trinidad in 1962. Pearl Connor (née Nunez, later Pearl Mogotsi) moved to Britain from Trinidad to study Law after the war. She married Edric Connor in 1948 and gave up studies in order to manage her husband’s broadcasting career, before launching an artistic agency, known as the Afro-Asian Caribbean Agency to promote the work of black performers in Britain. The

Connors were actively involved in preparations for independence in the West Indies via informal gatherings that sat alongside more formal, organized networks at the African and Caribbean Social and Cultural Centre (Walmsley 6–7). Pearl Connor acted herself and in 1961 launched the Negro Theatre Workshop with a performance of an adaptation of Peter Abraham’s novel, *A Wreath for Udomo* at the Lyric Theatre in London. Together, the Connors provided an emotional and professional support network for a generation of black performers in Britain. The actor Lloyd Reckord noted:

Her house was always a home for people like us. And she just worked continually, pushing black actors, quarrelling with the powers-that-be, arguing ‘Why can’t black actors get this sort of part?’, and generally working for us. (Pines, 53)

In this context, the British commission for the Dakar festival was an important opportunity for the Negro Theatre Workshop, offering the occasion to build on the Connors’ existing connections with the BBC.

An important precedent to the Dakar festival which took place on British soil, and which reveals some of the tensions surrounding race, immigration and cultural production, was the first Commonwealth Arts Festival of 1965. Held across the country after nine years of preparation, it brought together performers from 24 Commonwealth countries in a show of supposed unity. Like the British Committee for Dakar ‘66, its organising committee was chaired by the Duke of Edinburgh, signalling the British monarchy’s resilient association with empire and its aftermaths. According to one detailed analysis, the festival’s proposed show of multiculturalism evoked two reactions: “the first was to

marvel at the difference called forth through the festival; the second was to yearn for the aesthetic certainties of the past” (Natarajan 708). The participation in the festival of former colonial subjects who had now settled permanently in Britain was less than straightforward. The Negro Theatre Workshop, for example were included at late notice as a fringe event. They were told “that the Festival was for ‘artists’ coming from territories abroad and not for Commonwealth ‘immigrants’ resident in England”.³ The sting of an explicit distinction between “artists” and “immigrants” lingers in this archival trace.

In the cultural sphere, as Peter Kalliney has argued, the post-war period highlighted the complex relationship between the metropolitan literary elite committed to modernist “high culture” that hovered above “grossly political concerns” (129), everyday street experience of multiracial society, and the overlapping position of West Indian writers and “colonial intellectuals” based in Britain (and in London in particular) (129–132). George Lamming – who was a trustee of the Negro Theatre Workshop – set out some of these points of contact in his landmark collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*, reminding readers that “however different in taste and levels of education, the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] is a neighbour of Notting Hill” (63). In other words, for Lamming, debates concerning aesthetics in the contemporary moment, could not be abstracted from the lived immediacy of race and class relations in London. The Connors negotiated their position in this cultural landscape, between calls for ostensibly benign, yet inclusive, forms of performance, and arguments for a

³ NTW 3/1/3. Minutes of meeting of NTW Trust, 10 March 1966 at Africa Centre, p. 5

more profound and radical approach to the structural inequalities underpinning Britain's cultural landscape. In diplomatic terms, a strong British presence in Dakar was significant at a time when British spheres of influence on the continent were shifting following decolonization. As has been argued elsewhere, the Dakar Festival, and subsequent pan-African festivals in Algiers and Lagos were also theatres for the soft power politics of the Cold War, as documented by American and Soviet participants (Murphy 29–33). In the British context, these continental initiatives, driven by the Foreign Office, had significant secondary effects in Britain itself. Indeed, the Connors' work reminds us that hegemonic state actions concerning race relations were often met – and anticipated by – individual responses and interventions at a grassroots level.

By 1966, the NTW had performed several productions across the UK. Up to this date performances had taken place primarily in London churches, not because of the productions' subject matter, but due to a lack of grant income and financial support. They depended on the free use of these facilities (Minutes, 10 March 1966) and the minutes of their meetings stress that such staging enabled the "social and dramatic function" of the productions, rather than presenting any particular religious agenda:

The Workshop was dedicated to making some contribution to the education of the British public concerning the culture of the large communities of workers and students from Africa, the Caribbean, Indian, Pakistan, and other Commonwealth countries "The New Citizens". The Theatre in all its ramifications had an important role to play, and the advantage for making this kind of contribution. The NTW was operating

in circumstances which gave it a specific social responsibility. (Minutes, March 10 1966, pp. 7–8)

One consequence of these church performances was limited press coverage of the productions. In 1966, the NTW branched out to produce a televised performance of “The Dark Disciples” on the BBC. The latter was not unusual in a period when the BBC screened plays regularly. The BBC was engaged in ongoing, often fraught, discussions over the representation of Britain’s changing population and the power of television to shape social affairs in this period (Malik). As Schaffer argues, “from local community groups to the upper echelons of the British government, political protagonists obsessively engaged with television in the 1960s and 1970s” (3). The Connors’ material interventions were crucial in these early reformulations of the British cultural landscape. Their agency was founded due to the lack of consistent work for these actors and exclusionary practices at mainstream institutions such as the BBC which relegated black performers to a limited number of roles (Bidnall, 2013: 64). Handwritten notes in the NTW archive record that “one of the problems facing negro performers is a lack of suitable material (the parts available in existing plays are usually restricted to servants, cabin-boys, railway porters etc., traditional menial roles)”.⁴ By 1966, the NTW was actively seeking funding from the Arts Council in order to secure a permanent performance space.⁵ It had also amassed a prestigious list of patrons which included Sir Jock Campbell (Chairman of Booker Brothers sugar plantations in Guiana and the

⁴ Handwritten overview of NTW, NTW 3/1/4, George Padmore Institute, London.

⁵ Maurice Foley, a Labour minister with responsibility for immigration in the mid-sixties, played a key role in seeking to secure use of Wilton’s Music Hall in Aldwych. This depended on acquiring a permanent grant to run it, which was not forthcoming.

Commonwealth Sugar Exporters Association), who disassociated himself from his family's links to transatlantic slavery dating back to the eighteenth century and played a key role in the launch of the Booker Prize in 1969), Learie Constantine (the UK's first black peer, cricketer and Trinidad's High Commissioner to the UK), the actors Laurence Olivier, Joan Littlewood, Spike Milligan and Sidney Poitier.⁶ This network secured visibility which would be especially useful in fundraising for the Dakar festival, and which also reveals connections with consecrated members of the cultural and political establishment at this time.

Welfare, race and the “quality of thought”

The Dakar festival had radical potential for British participants, even if curated by members of the British liberal establishment. It created the opportunity for dialogue with participants and audiences from across the globe and as such the NTW trustees were immediately interested in taking part. Lamming played a key role in encouraging the NTW participation in the festival, following his attendance at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris. As chair of the NTW trust meetings, he noted:

The Dakar Festival is an attempt in a way to declare to the White World that they have all the time been dealing with peoples with ancient cultural backgrounds [...] there was a certain cultural slander and a certain cultural blackmail which had to be erased and that NTW was privileged to

⁶ In a recent interview, Otto Pick claims that Laurence Olivier chose the plays. According to Pick, Olivier's interest in Africa stemmed from his role as Othello at the Old Vic in 1964 (<http://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/otto-pick-war-years-just-start-of-peripatetic-colourful-life>).

be operating in circumstances which could help to make this possible.

(Minutes, 10 March 1966, pp. 10–11)

The festival compounded the workshop's sense of social and intellectual mission, bound up with increasingly divisive racial politics closer to home in this period.

There is no mention of development politics or possible economic benefit, unlike the US committee notes on the event, which note Dakar's strategic position as a port.⁷ One letter, apparently intended to help secure funding, argues that:

It would be a matter of deep embarrassment for the British Committee if the NTW found it impossible to accept the challenge which the Dakar Festival offers them. For the history and theme of this Festival is about the nature of man's responses to life in the context of Race. And this is a predicament which will be at the heart of every aspect of life in Britain for a long time to come. The quality of thought on issues of race is going through a process of steady deterioration in Britain today. Every experienced observer is convinced that it is getting worse; and Welfare workers in the field are often on the verge of despair about the effectiveness of their efforts. It is a major part of the Theatre Workshop's task to help reverse this trend of thinking and commitment in Britain [...]

In this respect the visit to Dakar must be seen as an investment of incalculable value on behalf of the work which people are doing to resist and eliminate the urgent dangers of a racial virus which is entering triumphantly into the hearts of millions of British people.

⁷ "Memo to United States Committee Members", 13 July 1965, Minutes 1964-65 Folder 2, United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, MG 220. Schomburg Center, New York.

The rationale for funding is framed in immediate, concrete terms, woven into the grand rhetoric of “man’s responses to life in the context of Race”. Connections are drawn explicitly here between the task of workers in the British welfare state and an invasive “racial virus” in this period. This virus refers to racism itself, in a deliberate inversion of biological ideas of racial difference and anti-immigration rhetoric, with theatre seen as a potential salve. In particular it is anticipated that the opportunity to exchange ideas in Dakar will improve “the quality of thought on issues of race” which was, it is argued here, in rapid decline in Britain, with increasing levels of intolerance and discrimination. In the period following the dismantling of the British Empire, there was clear demand for new ways of thinking and conceptualising race across social and legal structures, and in the collective cultural imagination.

The opportunity to perform in Dakar led to an extensive fundraising campaign by the NTW, which reveals some incipient questions in the arts funding landscape, in particular the question of state funding.⁸ The production was sponsored principally by the British Foreign Office (£1700), with other income sourced from the De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd (£700); Ariel Foundation (£350), a British educational charity with close links to the British government and which sought to encourage “integration” as means to improving race relations; and the United Africa Company (£200). The UK committee budgeted for participants’ travel expenses, but not fees or subsistence, causing difficulties for actors (both professional and amateur) leaving families in the UK for the

⁸ Archives at the George Padmore Institute in London and the Schomburg Center in New York contain the list of donors.

duration of the festival. The Workshop's trustees therefore also ran a public appeal which in total raised over £2000. This sponsorship raises questions concerning the relative autonomy of NTW's work, and confirms the kinds of strategic moves they made to secure finances. Such strategic funding contrasts with the more radical strands in black cultural thought also emerging in Britain at this time. Those strands included the work of the Caribbean Artists Movement (1966–1975) in which the Connors were also indirectly involved (Walmsley 117), and the founding of the UK's first radical black bookshop and publishing house, New Beacon Books in London in 1966. Both initiatives were founded on a principle of strict independence from any form of financial sponsorship or appeal to the British cultural mainstream, with the goal of complete creative autonomy. This path does not appear to have been a viable option for the NTW, a theatre company with its associated costs on an international tour, and given its founders' long-established links to mainstream institutions such as the BBC.

The unfamiliar familiar: Bach in the black Atlantic

In total, 28 people travelled to Dakar from London as part of the NTW contingent. Among this group, only the lead singers were full-time professionals. The group included the soprano and variety performers, Ena Babb and Nina Baden-Semper, alongside baritone, Horace James and actors Bari Johnson and George Browne. Other performers included "a chorus master from Nigeria; a West Indian Underground guard with the voice of Robeson. Some at work, some out of work: some of them on unfamiliar ground" (Programme notes for Church performances of "The Dark Disciples", 1965). "The Dark Disciples" was the most

successful of a number of blues adaptations of stories from the Bible which the NTW performed during this period (the others included “The Prodigal Son” and “Bethlehem Blues”). These productions were well-received in the surviving press coverage of performances preceding the Dakar appearance. One review of a televised performance of “The Dark Disciples” registered a blend of apprehension and surprise:

Perhaps I exaggerate but I begin to stiffen my upper lip when I see a billing like that for Meeting Point on Sunday “NTW presents ‘The Dark Disciples’, a Blues version of the Passion.”

Well, in fact it was splendid. Performed in the Church of St Mary-Le-Bow, London, it was stark and direct. I have not seen a live performance but I had the feeling that television with close-ups and no doubt a fair amount of cutting, probably made the best of a very moving presentation. The action followed Luke’s account from the Last Supper through to the end of the crucifixion with the body of Christ being taken down from the cross. Dancing was used very sparingly and was all the more effective for that. Variety was one of the most successful elements in the play. Variety of voices, variety of racial types and variety of colour, all resulting in most effective casting.

[...] A first class example of how art can be used to present the familiar in a new way that jolts one into a new understanding. (Review of television screening of “The Dark Disciples”, Patrick Gordon, *The Christian*, 8 April 1966)

Here the allusion to a “new understanding” of Britain’s multi-racial society is linked to the use of broadcast media and chimes with the NTW case for a renewed social and *intellectual* mission to challenge modes of racial thinking following their Dakar performance.

In Dakar, the production was one of relatively few stage contributions offering an experimental fusion, in contrast to traditional dances or narratives of newly independent nationhood (Neveu-Kringelbach 77). Its blues adaptation of St Luke’s passion was developed by Guyanese jazz musician, Mike McKenzie. The script shows a Passion Play in verse, to be sung and spoken with a chorus and narrator, and with simple staging.⁹ Tsitsi Jaji has unpacked the complex symbolic position of jazz in the Dakar programme. On the one hand, there was a tendency, exemplified by French Culture Minister André Malraux, and, to an extent Senghor, to tag this complex genre as an “exemplar of the black creative spirit” (Jaji 95). On the other, while the elder statesman of jazz, Duke Ellington, was present, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and other, younger members of the jazz avant garde were absent. For the NTW, jazz was one powerful symbolic element of the production, which also drew on baroque choral traditions (Programme notes to Church performance in 1965). Such relationships of cultural borrowing and historical nods or appropriation were not unusual (Nicholson 217). Jazz adaptations of Bach were common from the 1930s onwards, from Hazel Scott’s recording of the “Two Part Invention in A Minor”. The later success in France of the Swingle Sisters and Jacques Loussier echoed the popular currency of Glenn

⁹ ‘The Dark Disciples’ Typescript, NTW/8/1/4/44, Miscellaneous working documents, George Padmore Institute.

Gould's groundbreaking 1955 recording of the Goldberg Variations. The connections between jazz and baroque music can be hinged on a shared improvisation around chord sequences, use of counterpoint, and patterns of harmonic progression. These connections have been debated, and sometimes rejected by critics and fans hostile to an implied hierarchical notion of influence, or accepted amongst the many plural sources of jazz notation, rhythms and beats. The NTW performance brought such discussions into the performance spaces of the Dakar festival in 1966, offering a play based on choral traditions and biblical narrative, reimagined for the contemporary moment.

George Lamming's programme notes give some sense of the play's aesthetic in the absence of recorded versions.¹⁰ Traces can also be gleaned via the photographic record in the press and archive. The programme notes describe how:

In choosing the St Luke Passion we may have followed in the train of Les Swingle Singers and other exponents of Jazz Bach and Beat Bach who are inspired by the inherent rhythm of Bach's music.

But we are not trying to be just fashionable. We have chosen one of the lesser works of the Master (experts claim it is the work of a pupil, not of Bach himself) and with the greatest respect Mike McKenzie has contrived an honestly straight-forward blues version of the original. (Programme notes for Church performances, 1965)

¹⁰ The recording made by the BBC on 3 April 1966 for its *Meeting Point* programme has not survived.

The NTW use of Bach plays on the composer's prestige, yet as alluded to here, it is agreed by music scholars that Bach's involvement in the composition of St Luke's Passion is apocryphal. In his study of Bach's Passions, Daniel Melamed notes that Bach "attracts attribution the way celebrities attract paparazzi" (115). This attribution has been linked to various ideological and stylistic agendas, from concern regarding the future of German music to the possibility of national (and, by the 1920s and 30s, racial) musical "types" since the nineteenth century. Despite a partial manuscript source for St Luke's Passion written in Bach's hand, it seems likely that this work was in fact part of the composer's working repertoire (i.e. heard and performed by him, but likely composed collectively or, according to certain sources, by a younger composer). Its publication in the Bach Gesellschaft complete works in 1898 galvanized its incorporation into his oeuvre, however. Rather than shoring up an exclusionary canon, the vagaries of transmission and attribution of classical music from the Western tradition signal that jazz adaptations of "Bach" such as that of Mike McKenzie in Dakar can provide a further important dimension to the kinds of cultural capital associated with the composer's legacy. The NTW's performance of a "phantom passion" (Melamed 95) in Dakar resonates with the potential of a musical form not frequently racialized as black, to move – both spatially and emotionally – in the black Atlantic. Such movement might be conceptualized as "stereomodern", to echo Tsitsi Jaji's term, within the setting of the Dakar festival, working against established hierarchies of aesthetic value, in ways which are creative and indicative of forms of solidarity (and religious faith) forged from a broad range of cultural materials (13–15).

In form and content, “The Dark Disciples” contrasts with other prominent theatrical performances at the festival: Wole Soyinka’s satire of dictatorial power, “Kongi’s Harvest”; the staging of Senegal’s national hero, Lat Dior at the then national stadium; and the monumental pan-African performance on Gorée Island. Unlike the didactic underpinning of the Gorée island performance, which combined jazz and classical musical traditions with a strong historical narrative, “The Dark Disciples” seems more subtle and less spectacular. The use of the Cathedral as a venue was of symbolic significance within the urban landscape of post-independence Senegal. Elizabeth Foster has analysed the ambiguous role played by the Dakar Cathedral as a national monument in the French colonial mindset and independent Senegalese imaginary (124). Consecrated in 1936 as the *Cathédrale du Souvenir Africain* [Cathedral of African Memory], this edifice was a joint endeavour by the Catholic Church and the French colonial administration. It was originally conceived as a means of shoring up African support by appealing to the permanent, visible commemoration of African lives lost during WW1. The Cathedral bore the words, “A ses morts d’Afrique, la France reconnaissante” [To its African dead, France is grateful], on its imposing façade. Following independence, these words were replaced with the more conventional “A la vierge Marie mère de Jésus le sauveur” [To the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus the Saviour] in 1964, which remain in place today. The hosting of contemporary productions as part of Senghor’s broader pan-African cultural vision in 1966 positioned the Cathedral firmly within a new national narrative of Senegal, under the remit of its Catholic President, despite the country’s majority Muslim population.

With its casting and elements of music and dance, the production sought to present a fresh version of the Passion Play. George Lamming's programme notes record the visual and aural qualities of "The Dark Disciples":

This group of players who originate from different parts of the Commonwealth have shown, in a very short time, the role which drama can play in educating ordinary citizens in the art of living. They have brought their own social and musical experience to bear on the universal theme of the Crucifixion in such a way that the challenge of the Word, exemplified by the life and trial of Christ, is reduced to the essential need which each man feels to reach freely, and without bigotry, to the heart of his neighbour.

Here Jesus is a black man; so are his friends and enemies as they appear in the blues version of the gospel account. It is a rhythm of music which obeys the natural impulse of those who sing it. So does their movement in a sequence of dance which is free, direct and immediate in its translation of the message at Easter.

Deploying an essentializing trope of the actors' "natural impulse" and a repeated ideal of untrammelled exchange of ideas, Lamming here lays claim to the production's universal currency and its local didactic potential. The play's producer in Dakar was Christian Simpson, a prominent figure at the BBC known for his pioneering dance productions on screen. Further to Lamming's universalizing terms, Simpson noted that the play's success was to be found in its "inter-racial basis", involving black actors with "British technicians and advisers, on a European work with music by a Negro Composer." For Simpson, these

elements made this a “truly London performance”. Such statements anticipate the kinds of discourse surrounding state-sponsored multiculturalism, and debates concerning the type of work sanctioned in that context, found much more frequently in Britain from the 1980s onwards.

Representing Britain: the Arts Council and the NTW after Dakar

There are few mentions of “The Dark Disciples” in the Festival’s official archive or the Senegalese press. And yet it appears the performance was well-received since the company were asked for a repeat performance on Easter Monday by the Cathedral authorities, then a third performance was requested.¹¹ In the brief report recorded in the NTW trust minutes from 28 April 1966, it was noted that “someone from Vatican most impressed & intended to inform the Pope”.¹² For Pearl Connor, the Senegal experience remained “our first really big break” (King-Dorset 106), enabling actors working under the banner of the agency and the theatre workshop subsequently to access professional status at Equity, the UK’s trade union for creative practitioners. The actors also put together a variety show, performed at the smaller of the two stadiums in Dakar, with special praise reserved for female lead Ena Babb. This signalled a less formal, improvised form of performance beyond the official programme, alongside British pop group, The Blue Aces, who played in several Dakar nightclubs during the festival, and were referred to as “Les Beatles noirs” (Griot 995). Such informal spaces at the

¹¹ British Embassy report, undated, NTW/2/4/1, George Padmore Institute, London.

¹² Dakar report, Working Committee meeting, 28 April 1966, NTW 3/1/3, George Padmore Institute, London.

festival, largely absent from the official archive, contributed greatly to the lasting effects of the festival on its participants and audiences.

In the light of these material contexts of institutions and economics, what did it mean symbolically to “represent” Britain in Dakar during this period? The export of “Britishness” to Dakar in 1966 provided an opportunity for the British cultural establishment to test out its new multicultural national narrative on an international stage. Offering the scholarly prestige of the British Museum’s African art collections alongside theatre performances by artists and musicians from newly independent Commonwealth countries, now resident in Britain, the commission provided the opportunity for these participants to experience Senghor’s project firsthand and return to Britain better-informed.

An official report, penned by the British ambassador in Senegal after the festival, noted that “it was interesting to see how as West Indians [the company’s actors] reacted to representing the United Kingdom in Africa, their continent of origin, for the first time”.¹³ There is a glimpse here of a British diplomat seeking tentatively to monitor new forms of political, social and cultural representation among the African diaspora in Britain. However the extent to which the actors saw themselves as “representing” the UK in Africa – and indeed what that “representing” meant in practice – is less clear and much less well-documented. Certainly, the pan-African elements of the production seem less straightforward than the ambassador’s remarks might imply. The politics of representation were

¹³ British Embassy report, undated, NTW/2/4/1, George Padmore Institute, London.

central to the NTW planning discussions, as seen in the Dakar appeal letter, discussed above, which justified their participation in terms of social welfare.

Following the festival, the workshop's survival was also at stake, and a twelve-month development programme was outlined which aimed to provide training and ongoing support for black actors, writers and musicians. To support this work, minutes throughout 1966 mention the ongoing appeal for Arts Council funding. Meetings were held with the Music and Drama departments of the Arts Council, and a letter promising a grant of £500 was received in May 1966. This grant was to be contingent on ongoing planning and sustainability. In the end, they received a modest grant of £300 (Arts Council 1967, 71), signalling a significant step from funding by the Foreign Office and private foundations to a specific state-sponsored funding stream for the arts at a time when state investment in theatre was rapidly increasing (the Arts Council budget doubled to £8m during the 1960s).

The Arts Council – founded in the immediate post-war period – prided itself on differentiation from French cultural policy. It claimed to encourage autonomy and principle of devolved authority, rather than centralized influence operating from London:

There is a world of difference between the action of the British Government in endorsing the line consistently taken by the Arts Council, and the plans of the French Government for establishing a national network of *Maisons de la culture*. If there is to be a great new opera house in Manchester [...] that will come about because the people of Manchester

and the north have demanded it – not because Manchester was plotted on a map in St James's Square [London] as the right place. (Arts Council, 1965, 14)

As Asha Rogers has shown, Arts Council support also came out of a perceived crisis in the arts, with the expanding spread and influence of popular, mass-produced cultural media (99). As such, its decisions tended to align with a highly hierarchized artistic establishment and entrenched ideas of high and low culture, dating back to an Arnoldian notion of culture. The Arts Council Chairman wrote in 1966 that:

I believe the pop groups are on the whole winning the battle [...] it is very necessary, if we are to be a civilised and cultivated nation, if the standards which mean something to you and something to me, are to be maintained, that we do win this battle, and we can only win this battle by teaching people what are the worthwhile things in life. (Arts Council, 1966, 9)

The Arts Council remained a relatively narrow group of people within the liberal cultural establishment, charged with deciding what counted as “high culture” and preoccupied with extending that “culture” to the general population. While the NTW did not fundamentally change British race relations, the Connors’ sustained engagement with the liberal cultural establishment does appear to be part of a cumulative process which was both helped and hindered at different stages by state intervention. The Arts Council’s funding of the NTW was the earliest financial endorsement of black theatre by the state, though it is important not to overstate the significance of that decision, especially given the dearth of funding for black theatre companies in the decades that followed. Nonetheless, the UK’s contribution to the Dakar festival illuminates a key point at

which political and artistic voices sought new responses to questions about Britain's cultural relations with the rest of the world, as well as race relations within its national borders.

Conclusion

In 2017, Kwame Kwei-Armah's appointment as Director of the Young Vic theatre in London was widely feted in the press and theatre world. Among the reports on his long-standing career in film, theatre and television in the UK and the USA, little mention was made of his role as artistic director of the Third World Festival of Black Arts which took place in Dakar in December 2010. Based loosely on the theme of "African Renaissance" and under the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade, this festival's symbolism on the African continent, the success of its performances, and the intellectual scope of its stated vision have been debated and critiqued via comparisons to the 1966 festival. The involvement of a British director, however, remained little remarked upon in the British press, despite the significance of such a translingual, North-South, cultural collaboration within a global context of cultural production, pointing to the visibility of Black British cultural practitioners.

This example, alongside the earlier experience of the NTW in Dakar, indicates that there have been significant forms of cultural encounter beyond the linguistic silos created by Empire, but that these have, in large part, not been supported or actively encouraged on the whole by the British state, despite evidence of their

positive contribution to thinking through difficult subjects such as race, migration, and welfare. In his 2004 volume, *The Internationalization of English Literature*, Bruce King writes, “the literature I discuss has helped England to reimagine itself; it has contributed to the making of a new England” (9). Post-Brexit, the NTW contribution to the 1966 Festival in Dakar gives pause for critical reflection on the vulnerable potential of such creative endeavours to “make” more ethical forms of cultural identity. It reminds us of the fragile material circumstances that underpin how the narratives of this small island are produced and circulate. The translingual and transnational work of earlier generations of black cultural activists in Britain is particularly important to consider when seeking to understand how a landmark event such as Dakar ’66 resonated, and generated new thought on race and welfare, beyond familiar circuits of the black Atlantic.

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